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Older People's Parliament 2026: Horizon Scanning Report

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This report provides a brief overview of actions, policies and strategies introduced by the Northern Ireland Executive and other government Departments and agencies that impact older people, since the previous Older People's parliament in October 2024. It is intended to support the steering group for the 2026 Older People's Parliament.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

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Key Points

- [A Private Members Bill](#) (PMB) is currently under development by Independent MLA Claire Sugden, on tackling Age Discrimination in Goods, Facilities and Services. The Bill seeks to “prohibit unjustified age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities, and services in Northern Ireland.”
- [The Transport Strategy 2035](#) introduced a range of policies designed to improved connectivity across Northern Ireland. While not specifically introducing policies deliberately designed for older people, it does discuss improved rural connectivity, bus shelters, and ease of access.
- [There are calls](#) from across civil society and from the Northern Ireland Assembly to develop a Loneliness Strategy for Northern Ireland. However, there is no indication that this is being taken forward by the Executive.
- The Department for Communities has mounted [public awareness campaigns](#) to encourage the uptake of pensions credit have taken place since October 2024. The Make the Call Wraparound Service has supported pensioners access additional benefits.
- [Winter Fuel Payments](#), to be paid to pensioners from Winter 2025/26, were reinstated in The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.
- [There are ongoing programmes](#) to improve the digital skills of older people, primarily through the Go ON NI programme. This is intended to support older people use digital devices and access online services.
- The Department for Communities introduced [8 key design principles](#) when designing housing for older people.
- Multiple requests for additional information have been raised with relevant Departmental Liaison Officers (DALOs) on actions taken by the Executive. These are referenced throughout the report.

Introduction

This report looks at progress made against the recommendations from the previous Older People's Parliament, held on Saturday 12th, October 2024. It takes each recommendation and attempts to identify what actions, policies, strategies, or legislation has been developed by the Northern Ireland Executive, relevant government Department/ agency, or the wider sector. This is intended to inform the steering group for the 2026 Older People's Parliament on recent progress and help inform the topics they may wish to discuss during the 2026 Older People's Parliament.

Further reading relevant to each recommendation area have also been provided. These are not intended to be an exhaustive list on each issue / recommendation. They are intended to be a starting point for interested readers. A brief section has been included at the end of the report, which provides an overview of new issues that have arisen since the last parliament.

While there is extensive available information about new (introduced after October 2024) or ongoing strategies and policies from the Northern Ireland Executive and other government departments, identifying specific policy changes that resulted from the recommendations from the previous Older People's Parliament proved challenging. Multiple requests have been raised by RaISe with relevant DALOs, on whether the Departments can provide further information on specific actions relating to older people. At the time of writing, these requests remain outstanding.

Glossary of terms

- COPNI – Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland
- DALO – Departmental Liaison Officer
- DfI – Department for Infrastructure
- EqIA – Equality Impact Assessment
- GDS – Government Digital Service
- HSC – Health and Social Care
- MLA – Member of the Legislative Assembly
- MP – Member of Parliament
- PfG – Programme for Government
- PMB – Private Members Bill
- RaISe – Research and Information Service
- SEN – Special Educational Needs
- TEO – The Executive Office

1 Recommendations 1 – 4: Equal Access to Appropriate Healthcare and Services

- 1.1 (1) To review the appointment system with GP surgeries to make it easier and simpler for older people.

Digital transformation

Specific changes to the GP appointment booking system to make it easier and simpler for older people could not be identified.

There have been advances in other digital transformation programmes across Health and Social Care (HSC) since 2024. The Encompass system went through the final phase of its launch in May 2025. While it is not specifically aimed at older people, the system enables the public to “view medication, appointments and some test results online” via the MyCare portal.¹

The Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt was asked by David Brooks MLA whether the Minister had any plans to follow the UK Governments mandate that GP surgeries in Great Britain allow access to online booking of appointments throughout the day. While no commitment was made, the Minister did state that “access is not what it should be” and stated he had been looking at examples of the neighbourhood model (to improve primary care in communities).²

- 1.2 (2) To address the need for a much more efficient arrangement for hospital discharges that causes less stress for older people and simpler for older people.

The 2024/25 Health and Social Care Quality Improvement (HSCQI) Annual Quality Report discusses the Delivering Value (DV) Programme. This supported 11 local improvement projects focused on mental health stay and hospital discharge for older people.³ As of December 2025, this work has proceeded

¹ Health Minister praises HSC staff commitment as encompass data shows scale of daily patient care. [Department of Health](#). (February 2026). Accessed 18/02/2026.

² Official Report (Hansard). Volume 182, No 1. [Northern Ireland Assembly](#). (October 2025). Pg 42.

³ Annual Report 2024/2025. [Health and Social Care Quality Improvement](#). (2025). Pg 2.

beyond the scope of HSCQI and is now being taken forward by two regional subgroups (Western Trust and Northern Trust) focusing on data and outcomes. No public information was found on what the outcome of this improvement project and the impact it has had on discharge arrangements for older people have been or are expected to be.

1.2.1 Findings from other jurisdictions

Delayed discharges - Audit Scotland

Audit Scotland have produced a 2026 report examining delayed discharges in Scottish healthcare settings. The report notes that the Scottish Government and other stakeholders have targeted delayed discharges as an issue. Despite improvements, there is a lack of a consistent approach to evaluating these initiatives.⁴

The report highlighted several recommendations, including:⁵

- Consistent approaches to monitoring and evaluation on initiatives to improve delayed discharges.
- Publish improved guidance on guardianship.
- Develop implementation plans on digital solutions aimed to tackle delayed discharge.

1.3 (3) To develop legislation for Northern Ireland to prevent age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services.

Private Members Bill from the Northern Ireland Assembly

Independent MLA Claire Sugden is currently working towards developing a PMB on tackling Age Discrimination in Goods, Facilities and Services.

According to the wording of the PMB's consultation report, published in August 2025, the Bill seeks to "prohibit unjustified age discrimination in the provision of

⁴ Delayed discharges: A symptom of the challenges facing health and social care. [Audit Scotland](#). (2026). Pg 5.

⁵ Delayed discharges: A symptom of the challenges facing health and social care. [Audit Scotland](#). (2026). Pg 6.

goods, facilities, and services in Northern Ireland.”⁶ Further information about the PMB can be found [here](#), on the Northern Ireland Assembly website.

- 1.4 (4) To review and address the Department of Health's budget plan and its impact on older people. From the 11 cost-saving measures that are offered, 10 will affect older people, and five directly target older people.

While there does not appear to be a specific review of how the Department of Health's cost saving measures, the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) for the Budget 2024-25 and the EqIA for the Draft Budget 2025-26 do highlight the impact of the budget on older people.

EqIA 2024-25 Budget

The EqIA for the 2024-25 budget stated that “the sorts of savings the budget allocation is likely to require may have a differential negative impact on older people (65+) and children (under 18).”⁷ It highlighted that since older people tend to have more frequent and complex needs than the general population, a reduction in health services will disproportionately affect them.

The EqIA 2024-25 goes on to state that the budget allocation means that it will be almost impossible to restore the core grant scheme in full, which “may also impact on organisations that are run for the benefit of older people.”⁸

The EqIA 2024-25 states that persons with dependents will also be disproportionately impacted by a reduction in spending. This includes older people with responsibilities for caring for dependents, such as a person with a disability. It also includes those who care for a dependent older person.

A reduction in payments for support services provided by the Community and Voluntary sector (it is not stated what the reduction is) will have a ‘differential impact’ on older people. The contracts with the community and voluntary sector

⁶ Age Discrimination Bill: Goods, Facilities & Services. [Independent Claire Sugden](#). Pg 2.

⁷ Budget 2024-25: Equality Impact Assessment. [Department of Health](#). (2024). Pg 23.

⁸ Budget 2024-25: Equality Impact Assessment. [Department of Health](#). (2024). Pg 24.

were intended to support those living in the community and reduce hospital visits. The reduction in the Waiting List Initiative (WLI) activity is also likely to disproportionately impact older people.

Other budgetary reductions likely to disproportionately impact older people are:

- Reductions in Vaccination programmes.
- Reduction in funding for Enhanced GP Services.
- Restriction of domiciliary care packages.
- Reduction of 500 independent sector care home beds.
- Reduction of Hospital Beds.
- A reduction in staffing of 1,200 provincewide.

The EqIA 2024-25 also goes through the 2024-25 budget allocations and how it will mitigate the impact of the cost saving measures. This is found from page 34 onwards in the EqIA.

EqIA Draft Budget 2025-26

The EqIA Draft Budget 2025-26 reiterated the conclusion of the EqIA 2024-25, where the draft budget allocation “may have a differential negative impact on older people (65+) ...”⁹ While savings measures are mentioned in the EqIA 2025-26, they are (currently) potential savings measures and are not confirmed.

1.5 Further Reading

- Older people are not to blame for the pressures in the health system – Elderly feel cheated out of healthcare. [The Irish News](#). (2026).
- “Nothing you can do’ – Older patients ‘no longer feel protected.’ [BBC News](#). (2026).
- Voices of Concern: The Reality of Health and Social Care for Older People in Northern Ireland. [Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland](#). (2026).

⁹ Draft Budget 2025-26: Equality Impact Assessment. [Department of Health](#). (2025). Pg 25.

- Health Survey (NI) First Results 2024/25. [Department of Health: Information Analysis Directorate](#). (2025).
- Life Expectancy in Northern Ireland 2022-24. [Department of Health: NISRA](#). (2025).

2 Recommendations 5 – 9: Travel and Transport

2.1 (5) To extend transport connectivity to rural areas.

Transport Strategy 2035

The Transport Strategy 2035 draft consultation document sets out a vision that “addresses both urban and rural connectivity...”¹⁰ The overarching vision of the Strategy is “To provide a sustainable, safe, accessible and effective transport system which meets the regions climate change requirements, serves the needs of urban and rural communities, and supports economic growth.”¹¹

The Strategy notes that due to the dispersed settlement pattern of Northern Ireland, there are large numbers of people who do not have access to high quality public transport. The Strategy proposes expanding the capacity of Park and Ride/Share facilities, stating that “these sites can be particularly useful for towns that serve rural populations with high private vehicle dependency.”¹² The Strategy commits the Department for Infrastructure (Dfi) to expanding the capacity of the Park and Ride/Share sites. This is also intended to enable those in rural areas to switch to more sustainable modes of transport for part, or all, of their journey.

The Strategy also discusses bus and coach infrastructure in rural areas. It states that Dfi will “continue to consider the benefits of providing minimum levels of frequency and services by settlement type and size and learn from initiatives delivered by other jurisdictions to improve rural connectivity.”¹³

Rail Project Prioritisation Strategy (2025)

The All-Island Strategic Rail Review: Rail Project Prioritisation Strategy was jointly published by Dfi and the Department of Transport in Ireland. It was based on a Rail Review that provided 32 recommendations to enhance and expand

¹⁰ Transport Strategy 2035. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025). Pg 3.

¹¹ Transport Strategy 2035. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025). Pg 6.

¹² Transport Strategy 2035. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025). Pg 54.

¹³ As cited immediately above.

the existing rail infrastructure, over 20 years.¹⁴ There are several major projects that will impact Northern Ireland and enhance connectivity to rural areas. These include:

- The Lisburn-Antrim line reinstatement.
- The Portadown-Armagh line reinstatement.
- Portadown-Derry/Londonderry-Letterkenny line reinstatement and development of new lines.

Ministerial Announcements

On the 20th of May, Infrastructure Minister Liz Kimmins said that she intends to increase the funding to protect community transport services. The Minister stated that “The community transport service is a valuable lifeline for many in local communities.”¹⁵

- 2.2 (6) To consider the number of well-covered, seated bus shelters, the safe access to and egress from bus stops, and the number of accessible, affordable and user-friendly public car parking facilities.

Transport Strategy 2035

The only mention of improved bus shelters made in the Transport Strategy 2035, is under the proposed improvements to the Park and Ride / Park and Share section. This states that DfI will provide “better infrastructure along transport routes, such as improved shelters and waiting facilities.”¹⁶

There is also limited mention of public car parking facilities. The Strategy states that the “cost and availability of car parking is a major influence on the mode of transport people choose for their journeys, even for those locations well served

¹⁴ All-Island Strategic Rail Review: Rail Project Prioritisation Strategy. Department of Transport. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025).

¹⁵ Infrastructure Minister prioritises the protection of community transport. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (May 2025).

¹⁶ Transport Strategy 2035. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025). Pg 54.

by public transport.”¹⁷ Furthermore, an inappropriate supply of long stay commuter parking can work against the Strategic Prioritise for Transport.

Bus shelters

Translink is involved in a programme to improve bus shelters along a number of metro routes in Belfast. This includes doubling the number of sheltered bus stops along the Shankill and Woodvale Roads.¹⁸ Again, this is not work being undertaken by DfI.¹⁹

Additionally, there is information about the progress is being made on bus shelter improvements in Mid Ulster, but this is not an initiative led by DfI.²⁰

Please note that a query has been raised with the DfI DALO regarding this recommendation.

2.3 (7) The need for an Accessible Transport Strategy for older people to be implemented in Northern Ireland.

There is no indication that a dedicated Accessible Transport Strategy for Older People is in development or out for consultation in Northern Ireland.

Transport Strategy 2035

The Transport Strategy 2035 does mention accessibility throughout the document, but there is no mention of a specific accessible transport strategy for older people. The Strategy acknowledges that “although there have been significant improvements in the provision of accessible travel options, the reality is that for many people transport remains a major issue and barriers remain.”²¹

There is no specific mention of accessibility regarding older people.

¹⁷ Transport Strategy 2035. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025). Pg 54.

¹⁸ Metro Bus and Shelter Enhancement. [Translink](#). (2024).

¹⁹ Progress being made on new bus shelter requests in mid Ulster. [Northern Ireland World](#). (2026).

²⁰ Progress being made on new bus shelter requests in mid Ulster. [Northern Ireland World](#). (2026).

²¹ Transport Strategy 2035. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025). Pg 13.

Ministerial Announcements

Speaking at the 2025 Inclusive Transport and Travel conference, Infrastructure Minister Liz Kimmins said that “Accessibility in transport is more than providing ramps or designated seating, it is about working to create an inclusive environment. It is about dignity, equality, and the ability to live without barriers.”²² While Accessibility is mentioned, it did not include a commitment towards a Transport Strategy.

Please note that a query has been raised with the DfI DALO regarding this recommendation.

2.4 (8) Ease of access to appropriate benefits to assist with transport costs.

Transport Poverty in NI

The Transport Poverty in NI 2025 report mentions several transport concessions that are available for older people, people with disabilities and those on lower incomes needing to attend medical appointments.²³ This includes the Concessionary Fares Scheme and the Half Fare SmartPass, which is available to those receiving certain benefits. However, both schemes are well established, with the Report offering no indication of whether other benefits are available to assist with transport costs.

Please note that a query has been raised with the DfI DALO regarding this recommendation.

²² Accessible transport is cornerstone of social inclusion – Kimmins. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025).

²³ Transport Poverty in NI: A Health Equity Perspective. Belfast Health Cities. (2025). Pg 34.

2.5 (9) Continuous consultation and engagement with those who plan transport policy and services ensuring that older people have a valued voice.

Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee

DfI supports the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), which is the main source of advice to Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of disabled people and older people²⁴.

IMTAC agrees an annual Work Programme with the Department for Infrastructure based on key issues for older people and disabled people around travel and transport. The Committee responds to consultations and requests for advice from Government and transport providers. The Committee also raises issues directly with Government and transport providers. IMTAC holds at least 4 Committee meetings a year as well as other meetings with stakeholders to discuss specific policy or service developments²⁵.

Transport Strategy 2035

The Transport Strategy 2035 states that the “preparation of the transport plans has a heavy focus on stakeholder engagement and will allow local people to shape and influence the creation of more sustainable public transport for their community.”²⁶ While no explicit mention of engagement with older stakeholders is made, wide stakeholder engagement is mentioned throughout the document.

Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI)

In September 2025, the COPNI submitted [their response](#) to the Consultation on the Transport Strategy 2035. The response stated that the COPNI supports the overall vision and priorities of the Strategy but did state concerns that the Strategy does not explicitly commit to addressing the “fundamental and well-known transportation challenges faced by older people.”

²⁴ Inclusive Mobility and transport Advisory Committee, [About Imtac](#)

²⁵ As cited immediately above

²⁶ Transport Strategy 2035. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025). Pg 25.

2.6 Further Reading

- Travel Survey for Northern Ireland: Report 2022 and 2023 Data. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025).
- Public Transport and Journey Planning in Northern Ireland 2024/25: Findings from the Continuous Household Survey. [Department for Infrastructure & NISRA](#). (2025).
- Transport Strategy 2035. [Department for Infrastructure](#). (2025).
- Transport Poverty in NI: A Health Equity Perspective. [Belfast Healthy Cities](#). (2025).

3 Recommendations 10 – 14: Education and Work

- 3.1 (10) To maintain awareness of the health and societal benefits of providing educational opportunities for older people at a range of levels.

Active Ageing Strategy Evaluation – Department for Communities

The Department for Communities published an [evaluation report](#) into the Active Ageing Strategy in August 2025. Outcome 5 is 'Older people participate in cultural, educational and physical activity.' The report found that while respondents either strongly agreed (16%) or agreed (54%) that older people in Northern Ireland participate in these activities. However, some respondents commented that they did not know where to go for further information on how to take part in these activities.²⁷

Measuring the Impact of Adult Education in Northern Ireland – Department for the Economy

Published in March 2025, [the report](#) from the Alliance for Lifelong Learning examines the impact of adult education in Northern Ireland. While it is not orientated towards maintaining awareness of health and societal benefits of providing educational opportunities, it does explore the value of demonstrating the impact of adult learning.

As stated in the report, the aim of the research was to arrive at evidence-based solutions to improve data collection and impact measurement of adult education, which would:

“help promote the benefits, value and impact of adult learning, especially non-accredited, non-formal and informal learning, to individual and wider society.”²⁸

²⁷ Evaluation of the Active ageing Strategy. [Department for Communities](#). (2025). Pg 11.

²⁸ Measuring the Impact of Adult Education in Northern Ireland. Department for the Economy. (2025). Pg 8.

Please note that a query has been sent to the Department for the Economy DALO to see whether the recommendations laid out in the report on promoting the benefits of adult education, have been / will be taken forward.

- 3.2 (11) To ensure further education is at a cost older people can afford when seeking educational opportunities.

Active Ageing Strategy Evaluation – Department for Communities

Some respondents to the evaluation report stated the costs associated with attending cultural, educational and physical activities are too high.²⁹ Please note that the report made no distinction whether respondents were differentiating between the costs of cultural, educational or physical activities.

No public information was found on active steps the Northern Ireland Executive or another government Department is taking (or is intending to take) to ensure that education is at a cost that older people can afford.

Further education support – the Education Authority

The Education Authority (EA) [states](#) that for Further Education College in Northern Ireland, no fees are charged for full time Further Education courses. The EA has confirmed that for Further Education a student must be over 19 years of age but that there is no upper age limit for the Further Education Grant and free fees entitlement.³⁰

University of the Third age (U3A)

[U3A](#) is specifically intended for older people and is a network of learning groups aimed at encouraging older people to share knowledge, skills and interests in a welcoming environment. While U3A does not explicitly state what the costs of the course are, AgeNI does state that the costs of the courses are lower than most adult education courses, as it is run by volunteers.

²⁹ Evaluation of the Active Ageing Strategy. [Department for Communities](#). (2025). Pg 11.

³⁰ Correspondence between RaISe and Education Authority officials, 13-25 March 2026

3.3 (12) To provide educational opportunities for older people at a time they feel comfortable leaving their homes.

No public information was found, published after October 2024, that relate to initiatives, programmes etc. from the Northern Ireland Executive, or any other government Department on providing educational opportunities for older people at a time they feel comfortable leaving their homes.

There is evidence from the local authorities on holding activities for older people at times of the day that suit them. For example, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, during [Positive Ageing Month](#) (October), held events focused on Health and Wellbeing during the morning and early afternoon. However, it was hard to identify specific information about education opportunities being held at times that suited older people.

3.4 (13) To ensure educational opportunities are in locations older people can access, wherever they live.

No public information was found, published after October 2024, that relates to initiatives, programmes etc. from the Northern Ireland Executive, or any other government Department on ensuring educational opportunities are in locations older people can access. However, there are sources that provide further information on the need for inclusive design and findings from ongoing programmes.

COPNI: Advancing Age-Friendly Practice in Northern Ireland

As also referenced in section 7.2, the COPNI released a report in July 2025 '[Advancing Age-Friendly Practice in Northern Ireland](#)', which advocated for the need to ensure that Northern Ireland has the appropriate, age-friendly infrastructure in place to help older people access services. While there is no explicit mention of educational opportunities in the document, ensuring that that local educational opportunities are accessible is important.

Active Ageing Strategy Evaluation – Department for Communities

The evaluation report stated that the location of where cultural, physical and educational activities was also mentioned by participants. They felt that there is

too much of an urban focus. However, the report makes no distinction between these activities.

3.5 (14) To maintain an awareness of the support and needs of older people in relation to education and work in order to foster a happier, healthier and well-connected generation

Active Ageing Strategy – Department for Communities

While the Strategy pre-dates the intended timeframe of this report (post October 2024), the Active Ageing Strategy from the Department for Communities, the stated purpose of the strategy is to “transform attitudes to, and services for, older people”.

The 2025 evaluation of the strategy stated that relevant Departments believed that progress had been made in achieving this strategy's vision, particularly “in raising awareness and providing information and engagement with older stakeholders which led to improvements in the design and delivery of projects and services.”³¹ However, there is no indication of what these projects and services are, with no mention of whether they are in relation to education or work.

Careers Action Plan 2025-2028

The Department of Education and the Department for the Economy jointly launched the [Careers Action Plan](#) in June 2025. While the Plan does not specifically mention older people, it does reference people of all ages. This is clearly stated in the seven key strategic outcomes of the plan. These are:

1. Establish a careers ecosystem that connects people of **all ages** to learning and employment opportunities throughout their lives.
2. Introduce careers education in primary school with impactful initiatives and programmes, supported by information resources at each stage.

³¹ Evaluation of the Active Ageing Strategy. [Department for Communities](#). (2025). Pg 11.

3. Build quality and capacity across the careers system by establishing quality standards and developing the capacity of all partners to deliver high quality and consistent support.
4. Reform careers delivery, including the provision offered in schools, further and higher education with adults and better identify and target those most in need.
5. Strengthen provision for those with special educational needs (SEN) and those who experience barriers at **all ages**.
6. Develop a Careers Portal providing resources for people of **all ages** which will bridge the gap between education, skills and the economy.
7. Working with parents, carers and other community partners as key influencers of the users of our services including resources and enhanced communication.

The Plan states that “our careers system aims to provide support for individuals of all ages, backgrounds and abilities.”³² However, quite how the Plan intends to support older people, or raise awareness of the support and needs for older people to access education and work, is not clear. Please note that a query has been raised with the Department for Education DALO to see whether further information is available on the subject.

3.6 Further reading

- Careers Actions Plan 2025-2028. [Department of Education](#). (2025).
- Older people and essential skills. [Learning and Work Institute](#). (2024).
- Understanding Older Workers: Analysis and recommendations to support longer and more fulfilling working lives. [CIPD](#). (2022).
- Age Friendly Belfast Plan 2022-2026. [Belfast City Council](#). (2022).

³² Careers Actions Plan 2025-2028. Department of Education. (2025). Pg 6.

4 Recommendations 15 – 17: Loneliness and Isolation

4.1 (15) The need for a Loneliness Strategy to be implemented in Northern Ireland.

No public information was found that indicates that a specific Loneliness Strategy is under development in Northern Ireland.

The 2024-2027 Programme for Government (PfG) introduced three 'missions' to support the Executive Office to develop an in-depth view of life in Northern Ireland. These missions are People, Planet and Prosperity. They are underpinned by a cross-cutting commitment to Peace. The missions are further broken down into ten strategic domains. Loneliness is measured under the 'Caring Society' domain. [Caring society](#) is defined as 'a society that supports people throughout their lives.' Each domain is laid out in the Executive's [Wellbeing Framework](#).

Additionally, the Northern Ireland Assembly held a debate in April 2024 that noted the high prevalence of loneliness in Northern Ireland. The Assembly recognised the "urgent need to address loneliness among people of all ages and backgrounds; calls on the Executive to support the development of a cross-departmental loneliness strategy to tackle this issue on a long-term basis; and further calls on the Executive Office to lead on the development of a cross-departmental loneliness strategy."³³

4.2 (16) To provide government support for schemes which encourage older people to engage in social programmes such as local community centres and volunteering opportunities.

Shared Lives NI

The [Shared Lives NI](#) programme, funded by the Department of Health and administered by Age NI, is a service supporting people aged 65 and over. The service can include engaging in social activities in the local community.

³³ Official Report: Monday 29 April 2024. [Northern Ireland Assembly](#). (2024).

However, the service was launched in September 2023 and not after the 2024 Older People's Parliament.

Loneliness: The role of social work

As part of National Loneliness Week 2025, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, with support from the Department of Health, launched a [new resource](#) to help social workers respond to “the ever-growing issue of loneliness, isolation and staying connected in our communities.”³⁴ However this resource is primarily aimed at helped social workers identify the signs of loneliness, rather than supporting older people engage in social programmes.

A question has been raised with the Executive Office (TEO) DALO to confirm whether other government support has been launched since 2024.

- 4.3 (17) To leverage technology as a tool to combat isolation. This will require user-friendly training for older people in the use of technology as a means to communicate and remain in contact.

Go ON NI – Department of Finance

Linking Generations Northern Ireland ran the Connect IT programme, starting in January 2025. The programme was funded with the support of the [Go ON NI](#) programme, itself funded by the Department of Finance. The evaluation of the Connect IT programme found that, following feedback from participants, teachers and group leaders, it had ‘lessened feelings of loneliness and social isolation.’³⁵

Beyond this, there is limited information on how (or whether) the Northern Ireland Executive intends to leverage technology as a tool to combat isolation. A question has been raised with the TEO DALO.

³⁴ New resources aimed to help tackle loneliness and isolation in our communities. [Northern Ireland Social Care Council](#). (2025).

³⁵ Connect IT 25: Final Evaluation Report. Linking Generations Northern Ireland. (2025). Pg 4.

4.4 Further Reading

- The Programme for Government Wellbeing Framework. [Northern Ireland Executive](#).
- A silent epidemic: loneliness among older people and building social connections. [Research Matters: RaiSe](#). (2025).
- Loneliness. [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(NISRA\)](#).
- You are not alone in feeling lonely: Loneliness in later life. [AgeUK](#). (2024).
- Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks. [Department for Culture, Media and Sport](#). (2024).

5 Recommendations 18 – 22: Poverty and Older People

- 5.1 (18) The Department for Communities to mount a vigorous campaign to improve the up-take of pensions credit and to monitor closely those not taking up the benefit.

Announcements from the Department for Communities

In October 2025, the Department for Communities [announced](#) that the Communities Minister, Gordon Lyons, was urging people over the state pension age to check whether they were eligible for Pension Credit to assist with living costs. The Minister stated that:

“I would encourage anyone who thinks they may have a benefit entitlement to avail of this free and confidential service. I want to ensure that all available support and entitlements go directly to those who need them most.”³⁶

This follows an [announcement](#) from the Department for Communities in November 2024, that the [Make the Call Wraparound Service](#) had supported an additional uptake of £21.3million in benefits by pensioners. The service supports people access entitlements they have not been claiming. The 2024 announcement stated that additional benefits of over £6.6 million in Pension Credit had been accessed.³⁷

NISRA and the Department for Communities do publish a benefits [statistical summary](#), but no public information could be found suggesting that the Department closely monitors those who have not taken up the benefit. Please note that a query has been raised with the DALO for the Department for Communities to confirm this.

³⁶ Minister says Pension Credit check could unlock crucial cost of living support. [Department for Communities](#). (2025).

³⁷ Over £62 million in additional benefits sees £21 million boost for pensioners. [Department for Communities](#). (2024).

5.2 (19) To consider the Lone Pensioner Allowance which provides a 20% discount to folk living alone, could be increased to 30%.

The Lone Pensioner Allowances provides a discount to ratepayers aged 70 or over who live alone. No public information was found suggesting that there has been any consideration of increasing the Lone Pensioner Allowance from 20% to 30%. Please note that a query has been raised with the DALO for the Department for Communities to confirm this.

5.3 (20) To seek the extension of the GB Warm Home Discount Scheme to Northern Ireland.

No public information was found that indicated that the Warm Home Discount Scheme will be extended to Northern Ireland. The latest [announcement](#) from the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero, published in January 2026, mentioned that energy bill support was being extended, but made no mention of extending the support to Northern Ireland.

In March 2025, the MP for Upper Bann, Carla Lockhart, called on the UK Government to extend the Warm Home discount scheme to Northern Ireland. Her statement did indicate that discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive were taking place. The outcome of these discussions is unknown.

Please note that a query has been sent to the TEO DALO on whether discussions are still ongoing on Northern Ireland being included in the Warm Home Discount Scheme.

5.4 (21) The Executive to consider ways to increase the budget through investment and raising funds, with the savings ear-marked to reinstate the winter fuel payments for older people in Northern Ireland.

Winter Fuel Payments to be paid to pensioners from Winter 2025/26 were reinstated in [The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations](#) (Northern Ireland) 2025. This was announced by the Communities Minister in June

2025.³⁸ According to the explanatory memorandum, Winter Fuel Payments will be made to all pensioners, although for those who are not in receipt of relevant means-tested benefits and who have a taxable income over £35,000, the payment will then be recovered through the tax system.

5.5 (22) Include a tenth strategic priority in the PfG in order to plan properly for the impact of an ageing population.

The PfG does recognise the demographic trends of Northern Ireland, with a paragraph on pg75 discussing the need for greater investment in palliative care, stating “we are committed to working across the Executive to identify opportunities to improve support to those coping with death, dying and bereavement.”³⁹

However, the impact of an age population has not been added as a tenth strategic priority in the current PfG.

5.6 Further reading

- Pensioner Poverty: challenges and mitigations. [UK Parliament](#). (2025).
- Financial Security: The State of Ageing 2025. [Centre for Better Ageing](#). (2025).
- Back to cutbacks: How older people are managing the cost of living in a time of rising energy prices. [Age UK](#). (2025).
- Two million too many: Poverty in later life and how to tackle it. [Independent Age](#). (2024).
- Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2024. [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#). (2024).

³⁸ Communities Minister Lyons confirms Winter Fuel Payment for Northern Ireland. [Department for Communities](#). (2025).

³⁹ Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most. [Programme for Government 2024-2027](#). (2025).

6 Recommendations 23 – 26: Keeping Safe from Scams, Computer Accessibility, Communication and Digital Exclusion

6.1 (23) Promote inclusive, all user-focused design to ensure that websites and applications are accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

No public information was found which indicated that inclusive, all-user focused design is being actively promoted across the Executive or other government departments. Please note that a question has been raised with the TEO DALO to confirm this.

Accessibility Statements

Several Northern Ireland Department websites, including [the Executive Office](#), contain accessibility statements, describing what the website is and what is being done to improve accessibility. The website explicitly states that it is designed to be used by as many people as possible. The compliance status on the webpage states that it is partially compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.1. This document states that the guidelines are intended to make web content more useable by older individuals.⁴⁰

Similar accessibility statements were found on each Departmental website (Department for Communities, Health etc.). It should be noted that these statements were prepared and last updated before the previous Older People's Parliament.

6.1.1 Findings from other jurisdictions

The European Accessibility Act (2019)

The European Accessibility Act provides new standards on accessibility, covering a range of products and services. The act is an EU directive, aiming to "improve the functioning of the internal market for accessible products and

⁴⁰ Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1. [World Wide Web Consortium](#). (2025).

services, by removing barriers created by divergence rules in Member States.”⁴¹ Some of the products mentioned by the act include computers, smartphones, TV equipment, e-readers, ATMs and ticketing machines. Services include transport services, banking, audio-visual media and e-commerce.

The act is intended to benefit disabled people and the elderly, with the act expected to:

- Ensure there are more accessible products and services across EU markets.
- Accessible products and services are available at competitive prices.
- There are fewer barriers when accessing transport, education and the labour market.
- More jobs are available where accessibility expertise is required.
- Improve the accessibility of information to disabled people and the elderly.

Member states were required to adopt the measures by June 2022, with the measures being applied by June 2025.

6.2 (24) Offer digital literacy training to provide tailored training programs to help older adults and others develop the skills they need to use technology effectively.

The Department of Finance (DoF) supports a number of programmes which are intended to help older adults improve their skills to use digital technology.

The Department of Finance (DoF) Digital Inclusion Team are members of the Digital Assist Steering Group, a cross-sectoral body chaired by Business in the Community which helps ensure that government services are not delivered in isolation through appropriate interaction with organisations from across the private, voluntary and community sectors. They also maintain an active collaborative relationship with Age Friendly Networks across all council areas.⁴²

⁴¹ European Accessibility Act (EAA). [European Commission](#). (2019).

⁴² Correspondence between RalSe and Department for Finance officials, 11-23 March 2026

In August 2025, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) announced a funding allocation of £267,249 to the NI Executive to support and expand local digital inclusion initiatives.⁴³

The Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund (DIIF) was administered by the Department of Finance and used to deliver a suite of initiatives aimed at tackling digital exclusion:

- **Research and Development:** Conducting detailed research into digital poverty in Northern Ireland, including barriers across all 11 council areas and differences between urban and rural communities.
- **Digital Skills Training:** Delivering tailored training for disabled people and their carers, older people, and individuals needing support with money-saving and everyday digital tasks—to build confidence and improve access to online services.
- **Digital Skills Training:** For people who are deaf or have hearing loss, providing specialist support tailored to their needs.
- **Devices:** Providing 300 laptop devices to individuals and community groups throughout Northern Ireland, allowing them flexibility to use the equipment for digital inclusion needs.⁴⁴

See also response in 6.3 and the Go ON NI digital training and support programme.

6.3 (25) Support digital inclusion initiatives: encourage programs that provide older adults and others with access to computers, smartphones, and internet connectivity.

Go ON NI Initiative

[Go ON NI](#) is a digital inclusion programme, delivered by the DoF's Digital Inclusion Unit, that is aimed at creating a digitally inclusive society. The

⁴³ Correspondence between RaISE and Department for Finance officials, 11-23 March 2026

⁴⁴ As cited immediately above

programme partners with public and private organisations, supporting people from Northern Ireland get online, access government services and improve digital skills. It offers free events and digital information events and informal digital technology sessions set in libraries and other community settings. The Go ON NI programme specifically supports older people and other key groups, including those aged over 50, rural communities, people with physical or mental disabilities, socially or economically disadvantaged communities, and the long-term unemployed.⁴⁵

During Positive Ageing Month in October, the team attends events promoting the free digital skills sessions for older people in local libraries and community hubs. Additional targeted sessions are delivered during Safer Internet Day (February), Cyber Security Week (March), Get Online Week (October), and other key dates to ensure older people can access information and services safely and confidently.⁴⁶

The Programme supports providers (including Libraries NI, Supporting Communities NI, and others) offer courses on several subjects including:

- Digital skills courses for those struggling to access technology.
- Enhancing users existing skills.
- Courses aimed to reduce the digital divide, with some specifically aimed at older people.
- Advice for staying safe online.

While the programme has been in operation since 2011, the Finance Minister, John O'Dowd, voiced his support for the programme in 2025. The Minister stated that it is important to break down barriers to digital services and support those who have historically faced digital exclusion.⁴⁷ According to DoF, in 2024/2025 the Go ON NI Programme helped over 2,500 people.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Correspondence between RaISe and Department for Finance officials, 11-23 March 2026

⁴⁶ As cited immediately above

⁴⁷ O'Dowd supports project aimed at tackling digital exclusion. [Department of Finance](#). (2025).

⁴⁸ Correspondence between RaISe and Department for Finance officials, 11-23 March 2026

6.4 (26) Develop policies that address the digital divide to promote digital equity ensuring that everyone has equal access to technology. “Digital first” should not equal “Digital only” when designing services to be primarily accessed online

No public information was found to suggest that there are any new policies that have been developed since October 2024 that address the digital divide and promote digital equity.

The 2022 – 2030 Health and Social Care Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland does mention HSC's ambition to improve digital inclusion and a reduction in digital inequalities. This will be achieved through improved access to services and improve analogue care options.⁴⁹

Please note that an inquiry has been sent to the TEO DALO on whether there are plans to develop policies that address the digital divide and promote digital equity.

Press release from AdviceNI

In 2024, AdviceNI called for urgent action to address digital exclusion and protect vulnerable communities. The call for action called on policy makers, businesses and service providers to recognise digital access as a human right and ensure that “no-one is unfairly discriminated against due to a lack of connectivity, skills or digital resources.”⁵⁰

AdviceNI stated that Northern Ireland is one of the most digitally excluded regions in the UK, with the problem disproportionately impacting older people, low-income families and those with disabilities. It called on policymakers to take action to ensure that no-one is unfairly discriminated against due to a lack of connectivity or digital skills.

6.4.1 Findings from other jurisdictions

⁴⁹ Digital Strategy: Health and Social Care Northern Ireland 2022-2030. [Health and Social Care](#). (2022).

⁵⁰ Digital Exclusion in Northern Ireland: Access to the Internet is a Human Right. [AdviceNI](#). (2024).

Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2025 – UK Government

While not specific to Northern Ireland, the UK [Governments Digital Inclusion Action Plan](#), published in 2025 sets out 5 key principles to improve digital inclusion. These are:⁵¹

1. Identifying what works and delivering evidence-based interventions. This will be used to gather evidence that informs all stages of policymaking to support digitally excluded people and promote digital inclusion.
2. A cross governmental approach to break down siloed working practices. The Plan proposes the creation of a Digital Inclusion and Skills Unit to coordinate progress towards achieving digital inclusion.
3. Delivering in partnership with local authorities, national and devolved governments and private and third sectors. The plan recognised that digital inclusion is an intersectional and cross-cutting issue.
4. Supporting locally designed and delivered interventions. Different areas face different challenges, and the plan intends to support local stakeholders deliver specifically designed interventions.
5. Understanding international best practice and cooperating with international partners.

Government Digital Service

The UK Government Digital Service (GDS) have provided further information in a blog, about the steps they are taking to “remove barriers to accessing digital services by improving the standards, guidance and tools that help service teams build with inclusion in mind.”⁵²

6.5 Further reading

- Staying safe online. [Age UK](#). (2026).

⁵¹ Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps. [Department for Science, Innovation and Technology](#). (2025).

⁵² Designing public services that work for everyone. [Government Digital Service](#). (2025).

- Accessibility monitoring of public sector websites and mobile apps from 2022 to 2024. [Government Digital Service](#). (2024).
- Online Nation 2024 Report. [Ofcom](#). (2024).
- Digital inclusion and online safety for adults in the UK: A review of evidence, policy and practice. [Good Things Foundation](#). (2020).

7 Recommendations 27 - 30: Housing and Older People

7.1 (27) The development and implementation of a policy, similar to maternity leave for people who want to care for a loved one.

There is evidence that the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department for the Economy are considering implementing carers leave. While this would provide carers themselves with the right to have up to five days of unpaid leave, it is not entirely comparable to maternity leave. It is specifically intended as leave for those with pre-existing care responsibilities, not those who are taking time off with the sole intent of caring for a loved one.

The 'Good Jobs' Employment Rights Bill

The 2025 consultation document for the ['Good Jobs' Employment Rights Bill](#) outlines the Department's position to introduce a carer's leave entitlement on the same terms as those in Britain. This entitles carers to take up to one week of unpaid carers leave every 12 months to care for a family member or a dependent with a long-term care need.

Speaking in May 2025, the Economy Minister, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, has committed to making it paid leave when this is viable, stating:

"My objective is to make carer's leave a paid right. To that end, I also intend to seek powers to introduce a paid carer's leave right if and when funding can be secured."⁵³

Please note that a query has been raised with the Department for the Economy DALO to identify whether there were any updates to this policy announcement or an intention to introduce leave, like maternity leave, to care for a loved one.

⁵³ Archibald publishes report on carer's leave. [Department for the Economy](#). (2025).

7.2 (28) To ensure that throughout the development, design, and implementation of strategies, that we have full participation of older people with lived experiences who can help shape, inform and improve service.

There is limited information stating that it is a requirement of the Northern Ireland Executive and government Departments to consult specifically with older people to shape and inform strategies. However, there examples of Executive and government Departments (see 2.5) that commit to consulting widely to gather as many views as possible.

Under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, all public authorities, including Government Departments, are required to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity, including between persons of different ages. Each Department's Equality Scheme should set out how it plans to consult equality groups, including older people, on its policies⁵⁴.

Please note that a query has been raised with the TEO DALO on the requirement for Departments to ensure that they engage with the advocates of older people to ensure they are consulted.

Programme for Government 2024 – 2027

While the PfG 2024 – 2027 does not specifically mention older people, the PfG does state that it is “vital that the Programme for Government to work for everyone.”⁵⁵

The [Analysis of Responses to Consultation](#) report, published by the Executive Office in 2025, does state that widespread engagement took place with representatives from all Section 75 categories. This includes meetings taking place with groups advocating for older people.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland [Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 A Guide for Public Authorities](#) (2010) Pg. 36-39

⁵⁵ Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most. [Programme for Government 2024-2027](#). (2025).

⁵⁶ Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most. Analysis of Responses to Consultation. Northern Ireland Executive. (2025). Pg 5.

The Programme for Government Wellbeing Framework

It is worth noting that the [PfG Wellbeing Framework](#) monitors ten strategic domains of wellbeing, which is used to monitor the progress made by the PfG, inform iterations of the PfG and inform policy. Each domain includes several indicators, which can be broken down by different demographic groups, including age. This allows users to see how different age groups are impacted by the indicators. Better Homes is one of the domains, which includes indicators on:

- Availability of suitable housing
- Homelessness
- Housing costs as a proportion of household income
- Housing stress

Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

In the 2025 report, [Advancing Age-Friendly Practice in Northern Ireland](#), COPNI discusses the need for strategic planning to support Northern Ireland's older, and ageing population. It does note that much of the infrastructure and expertise that would enable the strategic planning already exists in Northern Ireland. The report states that this existing infrastructure includes:

- The Department for Communities Active Ageing Strategy.
- At the local government level, local councils have age-friendly strategies and age-friendly coordinators.
- Independent organisations and age sector networks, such as COPNI and AgeNI.

The report recommends that the Northern Ireland Government “should consider increasing its engagement with age-friendly stakeholders as a next step in its strategic planning.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Advancing Age-Friendly Practice in Northern Ireland: Supporting Collaboration, Impact and Sustainability of Age Sector Organisations. [Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland. \(2025\)](#).

7.3 (29) The need for options, capacity and availability to accommodate older people who are being discharged from hospital with appropriate support and care packages

Limited information was found on recent developments to support older people with appropriate support and care packages following their discharge from hospital. Please note that a query has been sent to the Department of Health DALO to provide further information around this recommendation.

7.3.1 Findings from other jurisdictions

NHS Support Federation

A 2025 report from the [NHS Support Federation](#) noted that, in England, the delayed discharge of older people from hospital could be attributed to several primary reasons. Delays were often incurred because of; hospital processes, care transfer hub processes, interface processes (discussions revolving around a patient's onward care), patient well-being and service capacity outside of hospital. Service capacity accounted for 32.8% of all delayed discharge cases in January 2025.

The report noted that £647million was earmarked for the 'Ageing Well' programme, between 2020 and 2024 to expand community-based services for older people. These services included faster access to rehabilitation care on discharge, personalised care and support in the home. The report notes that "despite the promises of money from the Conservative government, much of it never materialised."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Delayed discharge explainer: health and care pressure. [NHS Support Federation](#). (2025).

7.4 (30) When developing housing options for older people, we would appreciate consideration of the following in policies, strategies, and action plans:

- Quality of life
- Health and well-being
- Isolation and loneliness
- Actual space and design
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Positive model of ageing

Department for Communities

While it is not clear when it was published, the Department for Communities [website](#) does list 8 key design principles when designing housing for older people. The design principles the Department encourages housing associations and developers to consider are:

1. **Quality of Later Life.** Housing that is designed to support older people's independence, happiness and comfort.
2. **Health and Well-being.** Design that promotes active living and the physical and mental health of people as they grow older.
3. **Connections and relationships.** Design that helps residents be part of a connected and sustainable community, which encourages social interaction.
4. **Physical Space and Design.** Optimum floorspace that takes account of future aids and adaptations, care and support needs, wheelchair use, furniture and storage etc.
5. **Universal/Inclusive design.** Design which considers a variety of age-related impairments (frailty, dexterity, cognitive function etc.)
6. **Flexible and adaptable.** Flexible and adaptive design that helps to future-proof the house for successive tenants and enable people to be independent for as long as possible.
7. **Positive ageing.** A design that reflects a positive model of aging.

8. **Aspirational.** A design approach that is aspirational rather than institutional, promoting smaller, more homely and welcoming environments.

Programme for Government 2024 – 2027

The Consultation report for the PfG 2024-2027 noted that during consultations with older people, issues around housing were discussed. The report noted that many respondents raised issues on the pressures of housing costs for older people. This indicates that stakeholders and advocates for older people were consulted on housing during the development of the PfG.

7.5 Further reading

- The cost of caring: Gender inequalities and the risks of poverty faced by unpaid carers in Northern Ireland. [Northern Ireland Assembly](#). (2025).
- Introducing Carers Leave in Northern Ireland: A Briefing Paper. [Ulster University Economic Policy Centre](#). (2025).
- The Older People's Housing Taskforce Report. [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government](#). (2024).
- Age Friendly Belfast Plan 2023-2027. [Age Friendly Belfast](#). (2023).
- Housing an ageing population: a reading list. [House of Commons Library](#). (2021).

8 Recommendations 31 - 33: The Rights of Older People

8.1 (31) To bring forward a law against age discrimination when accessing goods, facilities and services as had previously been included in 2011, and again in the New Decade New Approach Agreement of 2020.

See response to 1.3.

8.2 (32) Invest in services and financial support that will allow us to live well in later life. One in six people is now aged 65 and over. By 2040, it will be one in three people.

See response to 5.5 and the intention to invest in palliative care.

The Northern Ireland Assembly tabled a motion in February 2025, that supported strategic planning for an ageing population. The motion noted that “failure to plan strategically will place unsustainable strain on public services, exacerbate inequalities, and impact the wider population.”⁵⁹ The motion was passed by the Assembly.

However, there is no publicly available information on whether this has been taken forward by the Northern Ireland Executive.

It is worth noting that there is no indication whether an updated active ageing strategy is in development from the Department for Communities, following the [Active Ageing Strategy](#) 2016 – 2022. Please note that a query has been raised with the Department for Communities DALO on whether a new active Ageing strategy is in development.

⁵⁹ Motion: Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population. [Northern Ireland Assembly](#). (2025)

8.3 (33) Commit to including the rights of older people in the PfG. The Executive must act to protect the rights of such a large proportion of the population.

There is no commitment on the rights of older people included in the 2024-27 PfG.

8.4 Further reading

- Lifting everyone up: Why a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons Matters. [Age International](#). (2026).
- The rights of older people. [House of Commons](#). (2025).
- At the centre of government planning: The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population. [Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland](#). (2024).
- Global report on ageism. [World Health Organization](#). (2021).

9 Recent developments for older people in Northern Ireland 2024 - 2026

Below is an overview of new issues arising for the older people sector since October 2024. Please be aware that this list may not be exhaustive, and cover every issue that members of the steering group and wider stakeholder may be aware of.

9.1 Access to healthcare

A [survey conducted](#) by the COPNI in the summer of 2025 found that older people were expressing strong concerns about diminishing access to healthcare. Respondents identified health and social care as the primary area requiring attention from public authorities. The report stated that long waiting lists for specialists, surgery and treatments “generate enormous anxiety among older people, who today experience a much-reduced sense of protection.”⁶⁰

The COPNI survey also found that “despite a 35.5% rise in resources over the last five years, the Department for Health has reduced service levels due to structural problems, rising costs, and increased demand.”

The report from the COPNI also noted that despite Northern Ireland having the second-highest per capita health spending in the UK (and the highest age-adjusted health expenditure) the health system underperforms relative to other parts of the UK. Emergency and outpatient waiting times are higher, and over the last decade, inpatient waiting lists have increased by 145%.⁶¹

9.2 Legislative Initiatives

Discrimination

Claire Sugden MLA brought attention to the need for strategic planning for an ageing population, in [a motion brought](#) to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the

⁶⁰ Voices of Concern: The Reality of Health and Social Care for Older People in Northern Ireland. [Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland](#). (2026). Pg 13.

⁶¹ As cited immediately above.

25th of February 2025. The motion called on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure that “services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy first Minister to embed ageing population planning in the final Programme for Government 2024-27...”⁶² The resolution was passed by the Assembly.

Claire Sugden is also in the process of developing a PMB on new legislation to tackle age discrimination in goods, facilities and services.⁶³ The public consultation for the PMB opened in March 2025.

Adult protection bill

Following the introduction of the Adult Protection Bill in June 2025, the COPNI published [its review](#) of the draft legislation. The report notes that the Bill has the potential to strengthen protections for older people across Northern Ireland, but “particularly for those facing neglect, abuse or coercion.”⁶⁴ The report highlights the expected impact of the report, particularly the expected shift from reactive responses to adult protection, towards preventative strategies by encouraging earlier identification of risk.

The report does identify several concerns with the Bill. It makes specific note of the new powers granted to allow public bodies to allow actions to be taken against an individual's wishes, including entry to their home, removal from their homes and medical assessments. COPNI note that these interventions “need to be proportionate and uphold the human rights of those affected.”⁶⁵

9.3 Housing

The Age Friendly Network NI and Social Market Research conducted a survey in November 2025 on the [future housing needs of older people](#) in Northern

⁶² Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025. [Northern Ireland Assembly](#). (2025).

⁶³ Public Consultation on Age Discrimination Legislation launched. [AgeNI](#). (2025).

⁶⁴ Beyond Good Intentions: A Review of the Adult Protection Bill as introduced. [Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland](#). (2025). Pg 7.

⁶⁵ Beyond Good Intentions: A Review of the Adult Protection Bill as introduced. [Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland](#). (2025). Pg 7.

Ireland. Based on data gathered from 1232 older people aged 50+, the survey report developed several recommendations:⁶⁶

- **Develop retirement villages and build more age friendly houses.** The report noted that there is a strong interest for retirement villages among older people, as well as new houses that are age friendly.
- **Adapt existing homes for accessibility.** This recommends that government initiatives focus on providing funding and support for home adaptations.
- **Increase the availability of sheltered housing.** Sheltered housing offers support services that enable older people to maintain their independence.
- **Improve proximity to amenities.** Future housing locations should prioritise locations that offer easy access to amenities.
- **Address heating and insulation issues.**
- **Providing funding and support services.** It recommended that consideration be given to establish and promoting the services which significantly improve the quality of life for older people.
- **Develop age-friendly housing.**
- **Promote social connectivity.** The report states that promoting social connectivity requires a multiagency approach; whilst many voluntary and community organisations run excellent programmes to support older people, these cannot be sustained without adequate funding.

9.4 Social isolation and loneliness

Research from Lidl Northern Ireland and Age NI in 2025, provided [new information](#) about the extent of loneliness facing older people in Northern Ireland. The research found that two thirds (65%) of over 65's said that they felt 'invisible' or 'overlooked', with 2 in 5 saying they feel lonely often or on

⁶⁶ Survey on the Future Housing Needs of Older People in Northern Ireland. [Age Friendly Network NI](#). (2025). Pg 4.

occasion.⁶⁷ It found that a quarter of older people said that they often or sometimes go a day or more without speaking to anyone.

9.5 Cost of living

On the 16th of March 2026, it [was announced](#) by the UK Government that £50 million was being committed to help people pay for the rising costs of heating oil. Out of the total allocation, £17 million has been allocated to Northern Ireland. The announcement noted that households in Northern Ireland are particularly reliant on heating oil, and that the UK Government will work “with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure protections are fit for purpose for Northern Irish households...”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Lidl Northern Ireland and Age NI launch hard hitting campaign as new research finds two thirds of older people feel 'invisible' and can go days without conversation. [Newsletter](#). (2025).

⁶⁸ Over £50 million to help families struggling with soaring heating oil costs. [HM Treasury](#). (2026).